

Chinese politics & policy

Xi Jinping expected to warn US on Taiwan in congress speech

Chinese leader favours faster pace towards reunification



Anti-landing spikes to deter invasion along the coast of Taiwan's Kinmen islands, which lie just two miles off mainland China in the Taiwan Strait © AFP via Getty Images

Kathrin Hille in Taipei YESTERDAY

Beijing's daily dispatch of fighters, drones and warships towards Taiwan is stoking suspicion that Xi Jinping intends to seize the country by force.

So when China's president kicks off the 20th Communist party congress on Sunday, nothing will be more closely scrutinised than what he says about the island.

Xi has tied his legacy to unification, describing it as integral to his plan to achieve a "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" by 2049 — a century after the party first set its sights on [Taiwan](#).

As the congress prepares to make Xi the first party leader since Mao Zedong to stay at the helm beyond two terms, policy experts believe Beijing could hasten progress towards that goal.

"Beijing will not wait for Taiwan," said Chao Chun-shan, one of Taiwan's most senior China experts who has advised the last four presidents on cross-Strait policy. "Xi Jinping has said that the Taiwan question cannot be dragged out without resolution, so they are taking the things they can manipulate themselves and doing them first."

There is ample evidence of that already. Over the past three years, Beijing has unleashed a flurry of initiatives that have the look of concrete planning for post-unification Taiwan and suggest to the public that this era is imminent.

They include a rail link between the coastal city of Fuzhou and Taipei in a plan for national transportation network projects to be completed by 2035. There is also advice being doled out on social media to Chinese citizens about buying property in Taiwan after unification, while internal lectures have been advising online opinion leaders that the country is moving towards unification.

The driver is Xi's suggestion — first put forward in January 2019 — that “Chinese on both sides of the [Taiwan] Strait” should start looking in more concrete terms at the contents of the “one country, two systems” concept — originally developed for Taiwan but first applied in Hong Kong. He proposed that they “[explore a Two Systems formula for Taiwan](#) and enrich the practice of peaceful unification”.

The Chinese leader's concept for that process is what he calls “integrated development”. According to research papers by Chinese scholars specialising in Taiwan policy, the approach envisions drawing the island more closely to China through a web of personal and business interests, and gradually winning the Taiwanese people over to Beijing's vision of a unified great nation through educational exchanges and propaganda.

However, in Taiwan, that push is going nowhere. Since early 2020, pandemic travel and visa restrictions imposed by both Beijing and Taipei have severely impeded the Chinese Communist party's efforts to woo Taiwanese students, businesspeople, religious communities, grassroots officials and gang leaders.

Even if cross-Strait travel opens up again, the prospects are dim. The Taiwanese government is pushing back against deeper integration with China, and even mainstream opposition politicians refuse to discuss unification because the vast majority of the population wants to retain the country's de facto independence.

Xi is now shifting from the more patient approach pursued by his predecessor Hu Jintao to a policy stressing advances towards unification. “During Xi Jinping's first term, our Chinese counterparts still remained focused on preventing moves towards formal Taiwan independence,” said Wen-Ti Sung, a lecturer in the Taiwan studies programme at Australian National University. “But now, their research and propaganda efforts have moved to the next step of promoting unification.”

An important reason is Beijing's growing sense of urgency over what it perceives as attempts by the US to change the status quo in the Taiwan Strait — notably, Washington's arms sales to Taiwan, visits by US politicians to the country and repeated statements by President [Joe Biden](#) that the US is committed to defend

Taiwan if China were to attack.

“As the US and China are embroiled in [a] great power competition, Beijing is now more and more focused on pushing back against what it sees as external intervention in the Taiwan issue,” said Chang Wu-yueh, a professor at Tamkang University in Taipei.

In a [white paper](#) published in August, the Chinese government said external forces had tried to exploit Taiwan to contain China, prevent the Chinese nation from achieving complete reunification, and halt the process of national rejuvenation.

“External interference is certain to feature prominently in Xi’s remarks at the party congress as well,” Chang said.

Beijing is pushing back with military threats, such as the People’s Liberation Army’s [unprecedented exercises around Taiwan](#) following the visit of Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the US House of Representatives, to Taipei in August.

But analysts believe warnings from US military and intelligence officials of a looming invasion are overdone. “Beijing still has strategic patience and that is a chance for Washington,” Colonel Zhou Bo, a former official in the Chinese defence ministry and a senior fellow at Tsinghua University, wrote in an [article](#) in the South China Morning Post.

Other experts argue that Beijing prefers using military force for intimidation, deterrence and coercion rather than war. “There are only very few scenarios under which Xi would seek unification at any cost,” said Taiwan’s senior China adviser Chao.

“Although for him, unification needs to be achieved together with China’s great rejuvenation, this is a dialectic relationship. He will not renounce the use of force to achieve unification, but achieving unification must not damage rejuvenation, the final goal.”

